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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews pertinent factors and guidelines for those responsible for determining the existence or extent of middle school/junior high school athletic programs. The guidelines take into consideration opportunities that should be offered to all students, health and safety of participants, equal opportunities for boys and girls, athletic resources, and control of athletics sponsored by school districts. Results of a statewide survey are presented identifying student participation in intramural sports, team as well as individual. Suggestions are made for the improvement of interscholastic athletic programs at the junior high school level. (JD)

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JAM
COMMISSION
ATHLETIC POSITION PAPER
AND
STATE WIDE SURVEY DATA

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Developed by
Association of Wisconsin School Administrators
1310 Mendota Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53714
608-241-9544

Cover designed by Bob Damon, 8th Grade,
E.G. Kromrey Middle School, Middleton, Wisconsin

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FOREWORD

Early in 1977, the Junior High/Middle/Intermediate School Commission of the former Wisconsin Secondary School Administrators Association undertook an important assignment. The Commission decided to survey all tax and non-tax supported junior high, middle, and intermediate schools in Wisconsin to determine their involvement in intramural and interscholastic sports and then to report this information to all participating schools and to professional groups. In addition, the Commission developed a position paper on middle school and junior high school athletics which provides a philosophy and a framework which, hopefully, will afford direction to this area of programming in all Wisconsin schools. Finally, they identified non-school groups who sponsor athletic teams so that pertinent information gathered and disseminated could be sent to leaders in these groups. These leaders are encouraged to direct their efforts in such a way as to have programs which are consistent with the philosophies stated in the position paper.

Following the merger of the WSSAA with the Wisconsin Elementary School Principals' Association in July 1978, the project was completed by the successor Junior High and Middle School Commission of the Association of Wisconsin School Administrators. Thus, our gratitude for this significant research and position paper must be extended to many people who devoted countless hours of their time to the successful completion of the project. Special recognition and thanks are extended to Stanley Angell, chairperson; Gordon Jensen who wrote the original draft of the position paper; and Glenn Kirchner for writing the survey report. Committee members were:

Stanley Angell, Middleton, Chairperson
Gene Britton, Appleton
Janis Doleshal, Milwaukee
James Edwards, Sparta
Dennis Ferriter, Sun Prairie
Richard Hoffman, Prescott
Les Howard, West Bend
Gordon Jensen, DPI
Kathryn Johnson, formerly of LaCrosse
Glenn Kirchner, Racine
John Roberts, WIAA
Matt Otte, WIAA

Elba Stafford,
UW-Madison Department of Physical Education
(Ex-officio member)

Finally, we wish to acknowledge and thank the following agencies which have reviewed the position paper and have adopted it as their official position also:

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Wisconsin Association for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation
Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association
Association of Wisconsin School Administrators

Charles R. Hilston
Executive Director

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POSITION PAPER ON MIDDLE SCHOOL/JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS

The value of competitive athletic programs for middle school/junior high school students has been debated for many years. Although plausible arguments have been presented on both sides of the question, no real concensus has ever been reached. Unfortunately, there is little objective evidence to provide the basis for confident decision making on this matter.

This paper is presented to review pertinent factors and offer reasonable guidelines for those who must determine the existence or extent of middle school/junior high school athletics in Wisconsin schools. Without concrete evidence of the benefits or harm in children's athletics, school people must rely on experience, logic, and the best judgment of experts in appropriate fields.

The potential educational value of competitive athletics is seldom challenged at this level, although the *means* of providing such programs and the actual conduct of the programs are often questionable. It has been established that vigorous athletics can be effective in building general physical fitness, improving cardiovascular strength, and providing recreational outlets.

Experts agree that physical education instruction should provide opportunities for all boys and girls to learn traditional athletic skills. Such instruction is quite appropriate for middle school/junior high boys and girls, however physical education classes seldom provide sufficient time for children to play the games which they are learning. Therefore, many children seek opportunities to compete outside the physical education class. For these young people, schools often provide intramural leagues which are open to all boys and girls who wish to participate. The extent of such programs varies considerably from school to school.

In addition to intramurals, and sometimes in place of them, interscholastic athletic programs are frequently found in middle schools and junior high schools. Interscholastic teams usually cater to a limited number of skilled students under the direction of a salaried coach. League schedules are arranged with other schools and daily practices are common. Such programs frequently resemble high school varsity athletics in that they feature attractive uniforms, cheerleaders, pompon squads, marching bands, and the like. Some school districts develop interscholastic athletics at this level primarily as an outlet for physically skilled students. More frequently, however, there are community or school pressures to prepare athletes for the high school varsity program. When communities develop middle school/junior high athletics as feeder systems for high school teams, excessive amounts of attention and resources may be focused on the programs.

The word "athletics", as used in this paper, means the broad gamut of sports competition, wherever it exists for children of middle school/junior high ages. It includes competition in physical education classes, intramurals, and organized interscholastics, as well as in programs sponsored by individuals or organizations outside the schools.

Highly organized, interscholastic athletic programs for middle school/junior high students arouse the most controversy. Advocates tend to emphasize the educational benefits of competition. They point out that competition is essential to the American system, and athletics provide an excellent means of learning to compete. They suggest other benefits of athletic competition such as the development of sportsmanship, discipline, cooperation, and physical fitness.

Opponents of interscholastic competition for middle school/junior high children base their opposition partially on the harm that may come to participants. They maintain that the immature bodies of young athletes are susceptible to injuries and trauma. They further claim that psychological harm results from prematurely introducing children into "pressure" athletics where winning is essential to success. Educationally, it is frequently claimed that specialized interscholastic athletics run counter to the exploratory nature of most junior high/middle school programs.

Neither the claims of advocates nor opponents seem to be totally based on facts. Inaccuracies and biases tend to color statements about middle school/junior high athletics. Certainly we know that the development of physical fitness and desirable character traits do not accrue automatically to athletes and capable leadership is essential to ensure educational benefits from athletic programs.

On the other hand, even medical research does not seem to confirm the claims that interscholastic athletics, including contact sports, are physically harmful to children at the middle school/junior high level. Injuries occur at this level but apparently in even less significant numbers than in high school sports. Furthermore, there is little evidence of emotional trauma resulting from participation in children's athletics.

If research does not provide answers to the middle school/junior high athletics questions, then school authorities must base their decisions on experience, logic, and reasonable assumptions. The following are offered as guidelines:

1. **Athletic opportunities should be provided for all students at the middle school/junior high level.**

   If athletics benefit some children, they must hold potential benefit for all. Every child's first school contact with athletics should be provided in the instructional physical education class. Opportunities should be available in a wide variety of activities. Beyond physical education, intramural programs should be provided to furnish competitive opportunities for all students. Intramural programs are organized within school districts or within individual schools. Participation should be open to all boys and girls, regardless of their skill levels. When games are played, all team members should have an opportunity to play.

   Interscholastic athletic programs at the middle school/junior high level should not be considered unless extensive physical education and intramural opportunities are already available.

   Even those individuals whose interest is in building toward future varsity teams should recognize the ineffectiveness of concentrating on outstanding performers in middle school and junior high school. Studies have shown that athletes considered outstanding at these levels are not necessarily outstanding in high school. Broad par-

ticipation should be encouraged in middle/junior high school to accommodate "late bloomers."

2. **When interscholastic athletics are provided at the middle school/junior high level, precautions should be taken to assure the health and safety of participants.**

Interscholastic athletic programs in middle and junior high schools are numerous. Whatever the justification for such programs, they should not exist unless adequate safeguards are provided. Physical examinations should be a prerequisite to participation. Protective equipment should be of high quality. Playing fields and courts should be free from hazards. Coaches should be knowledgeable about injury prevention, coaching techniques, and the age group with which they are working. The length of seasons and the number of games per season should be monitored carefully to protect participants. Although not all middle schools and junior high schools belong to the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, that organization's rules for junior high school athletics are designed for the maximum safety of boys and girls and should be followed. It is also recommended that all middle/junior high programs observe WIAA limitations on length of games and length of seasons. Varsity type atmospheres, including expensive awards and tournaments, should be avoided in middle school/junior high athletics.

3. **When interscholastic athletics are provided at the middle school/junior high level, precautions should be taken to assure the psychological/emotional health of participants.**

There is general agreement that athletics can be a valuable educational experience when administered properly. Such is not the case when programs cater to the interests of over-zealous adults. Athletics exist for their value to students, not to provide vicarious satisfaction for coaches, parents, or the general public.

Competing is a skill which children should be allowed to acquire gradually. The ability to handle the pressure of intense competition increases with experience and maturity. Subjecting young athletes to the pressures accompanying large crowds, newspaper publicity, bands, tournaments and cheerleaders may impose too great an emotional strain on developing boys and girls. Some participants may develop an exaggerated impression of their own importance while others buckle under the pressure. It is recommended that middle school/junior high athletics be conducted in a low-key manner under the control of the schools involved. Night games, particularly out-of-town games, should be avoided.

No interscholastic athletics are recommended below the 7th grade.

4. **When middle school/junior high interscholastic and/or intramural competition is provided, boys and girls should have equal opportunities to participate.**

The provision of equal interscholastic opportunities for boys and girls seems most satisfactory when "separate but equal" programs are developed. This recommendation does not argue the appropriateness of coeducational competition. It does address the problem of providing for the interests and abilities of students. Separate programs for boys and girls accommodate almost twice as many students as single coeducational programs. Separate programs assure opportunities to compete for many who would not be strong enough or skilled enough to win a spot on a single coeducational team.

Although separate interscholastic programs for boys and girls are recommended, it should be noted that under federal law (Title IX) *intramural* teams in non-contact sports must be coeducational, since intramural teams are not chosen on the basis of skill. Separate athletic teams are legal only in contact sports or in programs where team participants are chosen on the basis of skill.

5. **Decisions about interscholastic athletics at the middle school/junior high level must consider the factor of available resources.**

Schools today are usually struggling with financial problems. Taxpayer resistance, state imposed cost controls, rising salaries, and increased costs of equipment hinder the development of new athletic programs. Heating buildings and providing transportation for athletic events are already being criticized because of energy problems. At the same time, high school athletic budgets have increased significantly. The growing number of sports for boys has been matched by growth in girls' athletic programs throughout the country. Middle school/junior high programs are also expanding rapidly.

Since the objectives of middle school/junior high school athletics can be reached without the sophistication or expense of high school sports, it is recommended that alternative programs be designed. The potential of well-planned and wisely administered intramural programs has seldom been reached, usually because the required resources have been directed to interscholastics. In school districts where a sufficient number of students are enrolled to develop competitive leagues, the intramural route should be taken.

If interscholastic leagues must be organized, member schools should be as close as possible to avoid excessive travel costs and the loss of school time. Holding contests in the afternoon when buildings are still warm, or when lighting fields is unnecessary also helps conserve resources.

6. **Middle school/junior high athletics sponsored by school districts should be controlled by qualified school officials.**

Ideally, middle school/junior high school athletic programs should be administered entirely by school personnel. Coaches and athletic administrators are best qualified when they have both formal preparation (physical education or coaching courses) and experience in the sports they are conducting. Formal preparation appropriately includes medical aspects of coaching, physiological aspects of coaching, kinesiological aspects of coaching, problems and theory of coaching, as well as techniques.[1]

Often, well-meaning individuals and organizations are interested in becoming involved in school athletics on a volunteer basis. Although the help volunteered may be competent, there is no assurance that it will be. School districts should use the same care in assigning coaches to middle school/junior high programs as they would in assigning classroom teachers.

[1]The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction offers certification to graduates of approved coaching programs.

Athletic programs outside the schools are sponsored by a variety of organizations and agencies. Commercial interests often lend their names to highly publicized programs leading to state, national, and even international playoffs. Such programs, although obviously commercial, are often based on good intentions. For this reason, educators should be constantly aware of the dangers involved. Benefactors with ample financial resources may develop the very kind of over-emphasized athletic programs that should be avoided for pre-adolescent children.

Schools cannot prohibit outside programs, nor can they always compete with them. Schools should, however, provide the moderating influence of example. They should conduct their own programs for the best interests of young people. They should be very cautious about furnishing coaches, chaperones, equipment, or facilities to programs which may exploit boys and girls.

Perhaps most important, schools should seek ways of informing the public about the athletic needs of students and the kinds of programs which satisfy those needs.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS OF A STATEWIDE SURVEY

Three hundred and two (302) public schools in the State of Wisconsin were sent the survey, and one hundred eighty-five (185) responded in whole or part to the questionnaire. This was a response from sixty-one (61) per cent of the schools. These one hundred eighty-five (185) schools had a total school population of 99,510 students.

Much of the following information is in total numbers of individual participants, teams, contests or games, and types of awards. It was compiled to help in determining whether inferences regarding junior high school athletics were valid or not. It is not included to prove or disprove any special point about this area but to share some of the information gathered in the survey.

INTRAMURAL ACTIVITIES

The activities listed were twenty-six (26) in number and eleven (11) additional ones were listed by respondents. The twenty-six (26) were:

1. Archery
2. Badminton
3. Baseball
4. Basketball
5. Bowling
6. Cross Country
7. Curling
8. Field Hockey
9. Football (Flag or Touch)
10. Football (Tackle)
11. Golf
12. Gymnastics
13. Hockey
14. Modern Dance
15. Riflery
16. Skating
17. Skiing
18. Soccer
19. Softball
20. Speedball
21. Swimming
22. Table Tennis
23. Tennis
24. Track
25. Volleyball
26. Wrestling

The eleven (11) activities listed separately were:

1. Crab Soccer
2. Mat Hockey
3. Kickball
4. Winter Olympics
5. Chess
6. Cribbage
7. Co-ed Volleyball
8. Tumbling
9. Broom Ball
10. Weightlifting
11. Cageball

The total number of students of the responding schools was 99,510, as previously mentioned, so it is interesting to consider the total number of students involved in some of the intramural activities. It is also realized that many students are involved in more than one activity, but this isn't noted on the basis of the information gathered.

INTRAMURAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

Activity	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTALS
1. Basketball	4637	2942	7579
2. Volleyball	3475	3375	6850
3. Flag or Touch Football	5017	1470	6487
4. Gymnastics	1247	2462	3709
5. Softball	1885	1118	3003
6. Track	1545	995	2540
7. Table Tennis	612	492	1104
8. Tennis	645	455	1100

The other eighteen (18) activities did not have significant differences in numbers of participants as they were considered. The total number of student participants in intramural activities was 41,974.

Findings

It is significant that not all of the activities having the largest number of participants at these grade levels are team sports. Many stress the individual's ability in competition and are lifetime activities.

The survey found that sex distinction was not a factor in who supervised the various intramural activities.

Even though the statistics are separated by sex above, this in no way infers that the boys and girls are not combined in these activities in their particular schools.

An interesting observation in the figures above is that the number of girls participating in gymnastics is almost double the number of boys in the same activity.

INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETICS

The following chart gives statistical information on interscholastic athletics as compiled from the returned surveys. It may be noted that all categories were not completed by all respondents — therefore, some figures do not necessarily relate to a previous column.

SPORT	No. Indiv. Grade — Teams 6-9	No. of Comb. Gr. Teams 6-9	Average No. of Contests	Number of Participants on Team: Teams: 0-15	16-40	41-70	71-Over
1. Baseball			8	15	14		
Boys	18	6					
Girls	3	2					
2. Basketball			10	110	134	7	
Boys	257	11					
Girls	147	10					
3. Cross Country			5	39	23		
Boys	27	6					
Girls	25	12					
4. Football			7	21	51	40	4
Boys	97	15					
Girls	0						
5. Golf			4	23	2		
Boys	12	10					
Girls	5	2					
6. Gymnastics			4	22	11	4	2
Boys	4	8					
Girls	15	12					
7. Hockey							
Boys	0	0					
Girls	0	0					
8. Skiing			8	2			
Boys	1	0					
Girls	1	0					
9. Softball			7	8	6		
Boys	11	3					
Girls	6	3					
10. Swimming			7	13	9		
Boys	12	3					
Girls	10	2					
11. Tennis			6	30	10	1	
Boys	16	3					
Girls	15	4					
12. Track			4	64	139	39	6
Boys	124	20					
Girls	102	21					
13. Volleyball			6	19	24	2	
Boys	3	0					
Girls	65	12					
14. Wrestling			6	56	85	10	
Boys	113	20					
Girls	6	1					

Findings

The survey data can be divided into a number of segments. The first phase concerns the number of teams functioning in the most popular sports as evidenced by the returns of the 185 schools.

Basketball, as possibly predicted, has the largest number of teams with 257 boys teams at individual grade levels 6 through 9 and 11 teams of combined grades. There are 147 individual grade girls' teams and 10 combined grade teams. The number of contests that these teams participate in varies. Individual grade teams at grade levels 6, 7, and 8, play 6 to 12 contests, and the 9th grade and combined grade teams play 10 to 20 game schedules.

The second most popular sport in terms of number of teams functioning is track. Boys have 124 individual grade level teams and 20 combined grade teams and he girls have 102 individual grade level teams and 21 combined grade teams. The number of contests participated in by these teams possibly reflects Wisconsin's spring weather and the shortness of the track season as it appears that most teams are in only 4 to 6 meets per season.

The third ranking sport in terms of number of teams is wrestling which presently only involves boys. Wrestling has 113 individual grade teams and 20 combined grade teams participating in 4 to 10 meets in a season.

Football, as a team sport, ranks next with 97 individual grade boys' teams and 15 combined grade teams playing an overall average of 7 games per season.

Volleyball, the next ranking sport, is one in which the figures at the interscholastic level of participation are quite revealing. Of the responding schools only 3 indicated having boys teams at the 9th grade level, while there were 65 individual grade teams at the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades for girls and 12 combined grade teams for girls. Those volleyball teams were playing 4 to 8 games per season.

The remaining interscholastic athletic teams which appeared to have limited but noteworthy participation were baseball, cross country, golf, gymnastics, softball, swimming, and tennis.

One of the concerns of the committee in surveying schools was the amount of tournament participation at this level and the types of awards given to individuals involved on these teams.

In terms of tournament competition and including boys and girls teams for all 14 sports, the number of teams participating in tournaments was 129 and the number of teams not participating was 482. Of the teams participating in tournaments, 70 were from the two sports — track and wrestling.

The survey contained a number of categories for checking the awards systems used by the respondents. These were: 1.) letters or numerals, 2.) medals, pins, ribbons, 3.) certificates, 4.) trophies - individual, 5.) trophies - teams, and 6.) no awards. The tallies by numbers of teams for each of the above were:

1. letters or numerals ..... 256 teams
2. medals, pins, ribbons ..... 79 teams
3. certificates ..... 584 teams
4. trophies - individual ..... 23 teams
5. trophies - teams ..... 15 teams
6. no awards ..... 493 teams

It would appear from these figures that there isn't a great emphasis on awards that are comparable to senior high school types of recognition. In many cases schools give no awards and in others certificates appear to be more widely used than awards of monetary consideration such as letters.

The Need for Additional Research

The Position Paper on Junior High/Middle School Athletics was written out of a widespread concern about the course of such programs in Wisconsin schools. Admittedly, educational experience, expert opinion, and philosophical considerations played a larger role in shaping the paper than did solid research. Even though the development of the paper could not be delayed until all recommendations were substantiated by detailed studies, the need for continuing research is evident. The same concern for children which prompted the paper should provide the impetus for gathering more information and knowledge about athletics at the middle school/junior high level. Some possible areas of study are suggested below:

1. **Physical Effects of Athletics**

There has been an historic difference of opinion over the effects of competitive athletics on middle school/junior high children. It has been both claimed and denied that competitive sports, particularly contact sports, are excessively hazardous to boys and girls of this age level. Although considerable attention has been given to the matter, no current research-based conclusions can be drawn, with the possible exception that permanent arm damage is likely to develop when children throw curve balls in baseball at too early an age.

Much of the available information comes from studies that were done many years ago, prior to the recent significant growth of programs for both boys and girls. Careful new studies are needed, conducted and monitored by experts in child growth and development. These studies should attempt to determine whether current middle school/junior high athletic programs are physically appropriate for boys and girls.

2. **Psychological Social Effects of Athletics**

Frequent questions have been asked about the possible psychological/social effects of athletics on participants. At the middle school/junior high level it has been suggested that overemphasis on both participation and winning may be psychologically harmful. In recent years some high school and college coaches have noticed an apparent increase in athletic drop-outs who explain that they are tired of the highly-structured athletic training which began in elementary school. Some also complained about the pressure to win which was imposed by adults.

As with the physical effects of athletics any suggested social/psychological effects will continue to be conjecture until carefully planned studies address the problem.

3. **Effectiveness of Junior High/Middle School Interscholastic Programs**

A third area of needed research is somewhat related to the first two. It addresses the question of whether concentrating resources on varsity-type teams in the middle school/junior high years actually produces the best end results in terms of skilled performance. There is research which indicates that the athletes considered outstanding in elementary grades are not the same athletes who are outstanding in junior high school.

If the same relationship exists between middle school/junior high and senior high school performance, it may be that emphasis on broader programs should be considered. Broadly based programs with high participation are already recommended from an educational standpoint. It is possible that even varsity programs at the senior high level would benefit from less restrictive programs in middle schools and junior highs.

4. **Cost Effectiveness of Athletic Programs**

Future athletic programs in middle schools and junior highs may depend increasingly on cost-effectiveness. It is already being suggested in some schools that too much money is being spent on programs for the physically gifted. If this line of thought should increase, spurred perhaps by sex-discrimination and handicap-discrimination legislation, means of spreading the benefits of athletic budgets would have to be found.

At the present time few schools are in a position to make such decisions with confidence. Much research is needed on the best ways to spend the athletic dollar. It is not known, for example, what the response would be if adequate athletic programs, intramural or otherwise, were suddenly available to the entire student body.

5. **Needs and Interests of Students**

Interscholastic teams at the middle school/junior high level are usually organized in the popular and traditional sports accepted by society. As such they are assured a high degree of participant interest. Recently, however, a number of questions have been raised which indicate a need for study.

It has been suggested that some programs, particularly intramurals, fail because they do not offer sufficient choice. A steady diet of touch football, softball, and soccer is said to kill interest for both boys and girls. One suggested solution has been the expansion of intramurals into numerous short opportunities involving activities ranging from outdoor education through the lifetime sports. Whether such programs would receive widespread acceptance is not known, since so few schools have been able to provide them. Considering the broadening recreational interests of the American public, however, it would be wise to probe the possibility of broadened middle school and junior high programs.

Even more perplexing is the consideration of girls' activities. The fact that Title IX and other anti-discrimination legislation has assured girls the opportunity to participate does not guarantee their interest in all activities. It may be that girls' interest in contact sports will blossom, but girls may choose to ignore the rougher sports for years to come. Schools must find ways of providing appropriate and challenging athletic activities for both boys and girls, but determining interests is more difficult than merely circulating a questionnaire.

Many additional areas of suggested research could be listed, however these seem to hold promise for solving some immediate problems. In summary, we need to know the physical and social/psychological effects of athletics on middle school/junior high students. We need also to know how effective present programs are, both in terms of participant success and school costs. Finally, we need to know how adequately athletic programs are meeting the needs of boys and girls. The answers to these questions will provide a much needed basis for athletic decision making. Finding the answers, however, is a task for both formal and operational research.